



THE PALEOGRAPHY OF EARLY ODIA INSCRIPTIONS: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This topic deals with an overview of earlier inscriptions found in a variety of styles and places of Odisha, a province of India. This particular field of investigation and research always inspired by two noted Epigraphists, one is James Prinsep, who was an English scholar and the founding editor of Asiatic Society of Bengal, popularly known as the father of Indian Epigraphy and the other one is an Indian scholar Rai Bahadur V. Venkayaya, father figure in Indian epigraphy who served as Chief Epigraphist of India from 1908 to 1912. Till date most of the scholars inspired by the footprints showed by both the scholars. In this paper the writer is trying to focus on some early Odia inscriptions with date, place, features or styles etc. with the help of available referral works.

KEYWORDS: Paleography, Epigraphy, Inscription, Seminal, Monumental, Reflexive.

Odia is the state language of Odisha. Odia is an essential tool for anyone planning to work among people of Odisha. In addition to this the unsurpassed value it has as a contact language makes its status further glorious. Odisha has rocky hills, famous caves, built of hard stones containing trilingual, bilingual, mono lingual inscriptions from 3rd century B. C down to the modern time. Odia also has a stock of written literature which has remarkable richness, both contemporary and traditional type. Beginning with Charya Gitika, Odia has exhibited rich and continuous literary tradition. Scholars say Odia script of today originated from Brahmi of 3rd century B. C developed fast, got enriched. The origin and development of Odia script encouraged innumerable scholars for research work. The Hatigumpha Inscription of Udayagiri Cave, the Dhauli and Jaugarh inscriptions are some of early inscriptions which highlight the remarkable past of Odia script. Nibina Copper Plate, Sanakhemundi Copper Plate, Mandasa Patta, Copper Plate of Rana Karana Dev and Urjam rock edict gives a clear picture of Odia script & language emerges. The distinctiveness of Odia language had received due recognition from various scholars like H. T. Colebrook, Sir George Grierson, John Beams, Rakhal Das Banerji, Dinesh Chandra Sircar and many more. On the basis of division of time Odia can be classified as Proto Odia, Old Odia, Middle Odia and Modern Odia. I was appointed as the Language Instructor and the Observer by American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS) for an ORIYA PROGRAM. Erik Christopher Braun, a scholar from Harvard University of United States of America (USA) became my student. His decision to investigate the earliest footprints of Odia language and to prepare himself for the purpose he prompted him to study Pali, Prakrit, Sanskrit independently earlier. To supplement his study he too took a year of Avestan at the University of California at Berkeley. An added impetus for his work was his own personal Buddhist practice at the San Francisco Zen Centre. Erik's interest in Odisha and its language developed because Odisha was his primary research area connected to Buddhism. During his study I had the privilege to take him Dhauli, Jaugarh, Lalitgiri, Ratnagiri and other places of Odisha having Buddhist monuments. While seeing such architectural beauty both started noting the origin and development of Odia script and language. After that assignment now I have joined as a Senior Fellow at Centre of Excellence for Studies in Classical Odia, Ministry of Education, Government of India. Those points noted earlier with my American Scholar Eric encouraged me to do some serious works on paleography. Paleography can be defined as; paleography is the study of ancient writing systems. The term 'paleography' is derived from the Greek words 'Paleios' (old) and 'Graphein' (to write). Similarly epigraphy is the study of inscriptions out on immovable objects for permanent public inspection, is related to paleography.

Scholars in the field of epigraphy have highlighted the enrichment of Odia script as well as language. According to K. B. Tripathy, the Oriya inscriptions of the Gajapati kings are not confined to the province of Orissa. A number of them found in the district of Vizakapatanam in Madras. In the trilingual copperplate grant of Kapilesavara, found in the Bapatla taluk, in the Guntur district of Madras Presidency, a digest of the grant portion is given at the end in the Oriya language and script. The third king of this dynasty Prataparudradeva has left us an interesting copper plate land grant written purely in Oriya and partly in Telugu. This was found in the Nellore district near Madras. His son Virabhadra, with many titles, including the title of Dravila mandalesvara (the Lord of the Tamil Province). In another copper plate land grant discovered in the Nellore district begins the grant in Oriya and closes in Telugu. The aforesaid Bapatla grant (Oriya portion only) and these Nellore grants are examined and the largest number of the Oriya inscriptions belongs to the Gajapati period of Orissan history.

(The Evolution of Oriya Language & Script, Page 4/5)

In many inscriptions we see Odia words like achi (is), karai (does), kahai (says), niti (daily), Kiki (some), Chikitsa (treatment), Tini (three), Pachha (behind/late) parijante (upto) ghai (a corroding stream), jhalai (welded), thakura (God) etc. Such words can be grouped as proper nouns of persons, places, deities, things etc, verbs and verbal, case endings and post positions etc. K. B. Tripathy observes rightly, 'besides these we have twelve Oriya documents, mostly copper plate, belonging to the 17th, 18th and first half of the 19th centuries. In many cases reading from the facsimiles we find in them, the specimens of colloquial Oriya as in early Oriya inscriptions.' (The Evolution of Oriya Language & Script, Page/6). The Kharavela inscription of 1st century B. C uses several words which are found intact further corrupted in Odia language. The inscription of King Gana of the 3rd century A.D in early Gupta script found at Bhadrak. It is now preserved at the Odisha State Museum. Scholars say it is engraved in Prakrit, but it is too short to throw any light on the evolution of Odia language. The earliest complete Odia inscription is however dated 1051 A. D. (Saka Era 973). It was discovered in the village of Urajam in the Chikakol district. It is now preserved in the Chennai Museum. It belongs to the reign of Ananta Varman Dev, grandfather of the emperor Chudangadev, whose capital was at Mukhalingam. The Urajam inscription language is Odia, script Nagari (Southern Variety). The language of the record is Southern Odia which is characterized by some features of colloquial Dravidian especially Telugu. We see at least seventeen Odia words in another copper plate found in Ganjam district. Writings on epigraphy like Sonepur Oriya Inscriptions of the time of King Bhanadeva in Indian Linguistics, Vol. XVIII by K. B. Tripathy, An early Oriya Inscription of the 8th year of King Bhanudeva Singha in Odisha Historical Journal Vol. I by D. C. Sircar and two other interesting writings of K. B. Tripathy one is The Inscriptions of the Sun Temple at Konark published in AIO Conference Journal, Jadavpur in 1969 and other one Siddheswar Inscription of Narasingha Dev IV published in Epigraphica Indica, Vol. XXIX and two major writings of Satya Narayana Rajguru one is Orissa Inscription on a Stone Image and the other one South Indian Inscriptions explain many undiscovered features of inscriptions discovered in various places in the state of Odisha. So we say Odisha is truly rich in materials for the study and research of Indian epigraphy. From 3rd century B. C to 1051 A. D the long path of development of Odia script simultaneously Odia language is really interesting. Similarly some earlier inscriptions like an inscribed Shiba Linga with Buddhist Dharani having script of 10th century A. D. found in Gohiria Sahi near Soro Railway station of Balasore district, the Surya image inscription of Maha Shiba Gupta having script of 13th century A. D, found in Gandibedha now preserved in Odisha State Museum, Srijang inscription of Ramachandra Deva dated saka era 1517 having script of 16th century A. D found in Srijang about seven miles North East of Bahanaga Bazar of Balasore, Bhadrakali Temple Inscription found in Bhadrakali Temple premises in Bhadrak district having script of 3rd century A.D., Khadipada image inscription of Subhakaradeva having script of 8th century A. D., Sthaneswara temple inscription found in Sthaneswara temple, Manjuri in Bhandaripokhari having script of 15th century A. D., Mahadeva temple inscription found in Ranipur Jharial having script of 10th/11th century A. D., show the development of Odia language being characterized by the influence of Pali, Prakrit, Sanskrit, Telugu and other linguistic forces. During 1051 A. D to 1568 A. D a sizeable number of inscriptions found in Odisha out of which 18 inscriptions of Ganga dynasty and 50 inscriptions of Surya dynasty attracted scholars from India and abroad to do research. Such inscriptions show the variety of styles and locations throughout the state of Odisha.

Noted scholar Prof. V. S. Agrawalla rightly observes, "the Prakrit literature is not abiding interest for tracing the origin and development of almost all the New Indo Aryan languages like Hindi, Gujarati, Punjabi, Kashmiri, Sindhi, Bengali, Oriya, Assamese, Nepalese." (Preface/ Prakrit Pingala). Sir George Grierson in his monumental work Linguistic Survey of India says, "the Oriya verbal system is at once simple and complete." Such observations say Odisha is rich in materials for the study of Indian epigraphy. Asanpat inscription of 3rd century A. D, Maharaja Gana Bhadrakali Temple inscription, inscription of Ananta Shakti Verman of 5th century A. D, Dharmalingeswar Plate of Devendraverma of 652 A.D, 8th century A. D bilingual inscription of Bhubaneswar and many more inscriptions and copper plates have significance of origin and development of Odia script and language. Scholars like Satya Narayan Rajguru, Paramanand Acharya, Kedarnath Mohapatra, Dinesh Chandra Sircar, Rakhal Das Banerji, M. M. Chakravarti, Kunjabehari Tripathy, Satyanarayan Rajguru, Paramanand Acharya, Snigdha Tripathy, Herman Kulke in their seminal research works they have analyzed, explained, compared and glorified paleography of early Odia inscriptions. We may say that a lot of research can be done further to discover many untold stories related to Paleography. By establishing Centre of Excellence for Studies in Classical Odia at Bhubaneswar, the capital of Odisha, the Government of India deserves thanks, because this centre started a number of research projects including Indexing and Linguistic Analysis of Inscriptions. In near future other areas related to sources of classicality such as Numismatics, Manuscripts, Scriptures of Buddhism and Jainism, travelogues of ancient travelers etc to be started by experts and scholars of this Centre to glorify Odia Language as 6th Classical Language of India.

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